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FM AMEMBASSY ROME
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1617
INFO RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0461
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY 9843
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE PRIORITY 3462
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES PRIORITY 3635
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 ROME 000177

NOFORN
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/13/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [IT](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: GETTING ITALY TO DO MORE IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: A. ROME 160
[1](#)B. 08 ROME 726
[1](#)C. 08 ROME 1573
[1](#)D. 08 ROME 1452

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Elizabeth Dibble for Reasons 1.4
(B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a joint Political and Economic Section cable.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Summary. Italy can and should do more in Afghanistan. It is a top-tier contributor to ISAF with 2,600 troops (making it the sixth-largest contingent), and it has made Afghanistan a centerpiece of its G8 Presidency by proposing to hold an Afghanistan-Pakistan Conference on the margins of the G8 Foreign Ministerial in June. However, Italy suffers from a credibility gap among ISAF partners because of its reluctance to engage in combat operations and its reputation for paying ransom and protection money to insurgents. Italian commanders tell us they would do more if the GOI provided the resources and the political support needed for robust operations. They do not have sufficient troops in their command sector (RC-West) to control the territory and therefore confine their troops to limited operations so as not to endanger them. The Government of PM Berlusconi is vocal in its support for ISAF but fearful of casualties. When we ask for additional military resources or donor assistance for Afghanistan, GOI officials reply that their tight budget prevents them from doing more. We should not accept this excuse. The fact is that the GOI has made a policy decision to spend less on defense - roughly 1 per cent of GDP - than is needed to maintain its status as a top-tier NATO ally. We should push them to put into their defense budget sufficient funds to meet their responsibilities in Afghanistan.

[1](#)3. (C/NF) With a strong majority in Parliament and opposition support for the mission, Berlusconi does not face the sort of domestic opposition that the leaders of Canada, the Netherlands, France and Germany have had to overcome to increase their civil and military contribution to Afghanistan. Berlusconi is eager to get off on the right foot with the new U.S. Administration and fears losing his privileged relationship with Washington to European rivals. The USG should press the GOI to make the same tough choices their ISAF partners have made and commit enough troops and resources to do the job, particularly if it presumes to take a leadership role on Afghanistan within the G8. End Summary.

Italy in Afghanistan: A Brief History

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¶4. (C/NF) Italy currently has 2,600 troops in ISAF: 2,000 in Regional Command - West, which they command, and 600 in RC-Kabul and ISAF HQ. However, it has only budgeted enough in 2009 to maintain a level of 2,350 -- meaning that the current level is part of a temporary plus-up and will drop again after the August Afghan elections unless Berlusconi asks Parliament for more funds. Italy was one of the founding partners in ISAF and has held the command of RC-West since it was created in 2005. It held the rotating command of RC-Capital from December 2007 to August 2008, leads a PRT in Herat, has committed seven OMLTs (Operational Mentor Liaison Teams) to train Afghan Army units and over sixty Carabinieri and Finance Police to train police and border guards. At its peak in early 2008, when it commanded both RC-West and RC-Capital, Italy had 2,850 troops and was the fourth largest ISAF contributor. When it relinquished RC-Capital to the French in August 2008, Italy began drawing down troops in Kabul.

¶5. (S/NF) At the time, MFA and MOD officials told us that they were relieved to be rid of RC-Capital because they wanted to concentrate troops in RC-West to head off a worsening security situation fueled, in part, by a rise in poppy cultivation in Farah and arms trafficking from Iran. They also were keen to fill RC-West shortfalls identified in the NATO Combined Joint Statement of Requirements (CJSOR), which include 1-2 maneuver battalions, fixed-wing and rotary aviation, and additional OMLTs. Since then, however, Italy has been slow to re-staff RC-West, citing the tight defense budget and NATO's inability to backfill the troops it was

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planning to remove from Kabul (a battle group of roughly 500 Italian troops is still there). As a result, Italy fell to sixth-largest ISAF contributor while France, Canada and Germany increased their contingents and security in RC-West continued to worsen, particularly in Farah and Baghdis, where Taliban fighters have filled the vacuum left by Italian and Spanish troops.

¶6. (C/NF) At a recent MFA-sponsored conference designed to urge other RC-West partners (including Spain, the U.S. and Lithuania, the largest contributors after Italy) to contribute more forces for 2009 Election Support and for RC-West generally, the Italians again repeated the claim that they planned to fill the Herat and Farah maneuver battalions once COMISAF frees up their forces from duty in RC-Capital (Ref A). Given that security in RC-West should not be held hostage to security conditions in Kabul, we have suggested to the Italians that they staff up RC-West regardless, but again they have cited budget constraints for failing to act.

The Question of Protection Money

¶7. (S/NF) Italy has long been suspected of paying protection money and ransom both in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the kidnappings of Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo and others were almost certainly resolved by ransom payments. Based on information obtained in 2008 indicating that the Italian intelligence services were paying insurgents in the Kabul region not to target Italian troops, then-Ambassador Spogli raised the issue with PM Berlusconi and received assurances that the GOI would investigate the matter and put a stop to such practices if the allegations were true (Ref B). President Bush also reportedly raised the issue directly with PM Berlusconi, who reiterated that the GOI would not engage in such activity. Since that time, we have not heard any further allegations of protection payments, but it is clear from discussions with foreign diplomats and USG visitors who cover Afghanistan that Italy's reputation has suffered as a result.

¶8. (C/NF) Italian troops and civilians are also often accused of doing too little in their areas of responsibility. When

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid gave an interview last fall placing the blame for the worsening security situation in Herat on the Italian PRT, saying it rarely left the compound, FM Frattini gave an angry public rebuttal. However, recent reporting from Afghanistan has highlighted growing local dissatisfaction with the Herat PRT and with the decline in security in what used to be one of Afghanistan's safest cities.

¶9. (S/NF) The GOI's political leadership remains highly casualty averse. Italy has suffered 12 casualties in Afghanistan - six from enemy action - and none since Berlusconi returned to power in May 2008, indicating that despite its pro-ISAF rhetoric, the center-right Berlusconi government is as reluctant to put troops in harm's way as was the notoriously weak-kneed center-left Prodi coalition. Army Chief of Staff Castagnetti told Gen. Petraeus categorically in December 2008 that Italy does not conduct offensive operations in RC-West - the implication being that the GOI has made clear that the military should take as few risks as possible.

¶10. (C/NF) But even if the GOI were to authorize a more aggressive military posture, Italian commanders claim that their forces are too thin on the ground to have much impact. General Arena, a former commander of RC-West, told the press last year that he had fewer troops in RC-West than the number of police deployed to maintain public order at a Roma-Lazio soccer game. CHOD Camporini told Gen. Petraeus that if the Italian contingent in Lebanon had the same troop-to-territory ratio that exists in Afghanistan, Italy would have 22 troops in UNIFIL, not 2,200 (Ref C).

¶11. (C/NF) The Italian military would very much like to have enough troops to do the job: it values the experience gained in Afghanistan over that of Kosovo, where it has 13 companies doing little more than guard duty (compared to 3 companies in RC-West). CHOD Camporini told Gen. Petraeus that in its recent defense review, the General Staff had pegged its

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"level of ambition" at deploying 12,000 troops on overseas missions at any one time, but unfortunately has only been given funding to keep 8,000-9,000 deployed abroad at any one time.

The Budget Excuse

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¶12. (C/NF) GOI officials routinely cite Italy's "tight budget situation" when responding to Embassy demarches requesting Italian contributions for Afghanistan, including our recent request that the GOI provide 100 million dollars for the training of the Afghan National Army (Ref D). Total Italian defense spending was approximately 1.38 percent of GDP in ¶2008. This was approximately 3 percent of total government spending. What we would consider real defense spending was actually lower, because the Italian defense budget includes items that elsewhere would be counted as internal police operations. Subtracting expenditures for the Carabinieri (a domestic police force nominally under military control) and for pensions brings total Defense spending down to 0.96 percent of GDP. The U.S. spends approximately 4.2 percent of GDP, Britain is at roughly 2.5 percent, France at 2.3. In January 2009, a close advisor to Finance Minister Tremonti admitted to us that "the Italian defense budget is carefully calibrated to meet the minimum threshold to keep the U.S. and other allies happy, and to keep FINMECCANICA (Italy's premier defense supplier) in business."

¶13. (C/NF) Italy does face budget difficulties. It is struggling to bring its deficit into conformity with EU Stability and Growth Pact (Maastricht Treaty) guidelines. It has one of the highest debt-to-GDP ratios in the EU. This high level of debt means that interest payments consume a large share of government revenues, reducing discretionary

funds. The current recession has already resulted in a drop in the government's revenues for the current year, along with big increases in the government's "social safety net" spending. However, the real financial constraint on Italy's ability to do more in Afghanistan does not come from the Maastricht Treaty, nor from the current recession. The real constraint comes from resource allocation decisions made over a long period by the GOI in its budget process, resulting in the allocation of only 3 percent of government spending for defense.

¶14. (C/NF) There are indications that even within current constraints the Italians could do more. Following up on campaign pledges to do something about crime, soon after taking power Berlusconi assigned about 3,000 army troops to police duty in Italian cities. Many of these troops replaced Italian police on guard duty at embassies in Rome. In addition to raising additional questions about how much of Italy's defense spending is really "defense" spending, this move raises questions about Italy's claim that it is already "stretched to the limit" in its defense resources.

Other Possible Contributions: Police Training, Justice Reform

¶15. (C/NF) Italy's average annual aid contribution to Afghanistan (Euro 50 million), while respectable, should be higher given its leadership of the Herat PRT and its traditional role as lead nation in Justice Sector reform. In addition, Italy has other programs in Afghanistan that could benefit from a strengthened commitment of resources and better security on the ground. The Carabinieri, who train the Iraqi National Police under NTM-I, were invited by the U.S. to train the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the elite Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) in early 2008. Under intense diplomatic pressure culminating in a request to PM Berlusconi from President Bush, Italy agreed to send 60 Carabinieri to train ANCOP at a facility near Herat and to embed with U.S. Marine platoons to train ANP at the district level in Farah and Helmand province. To do this, Italy also agreed to drop geographic caveats preventing its troops from deploying to RC-South. The Marine units were eventually diverted from police training to fight the Taliban, but 34 Carabinieri trainers eventually deployed to the ANCOP facility and have since taken the ANCOP training over from INL contractors. One Carabinieri officer recently told us that the Carabinieri want to move the training facility to

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Kabul because the facility in Herat province is in an area strewn with Soviet-era mines and is too close to insurgent strongholds. When asked whether the Italian military could clear the mines and provide force protection, he said that the Carabinieri had no control over the Italian RC-West Commander's priorities.

¶16. (C/NF) MFA and Carabinieri officials have told us they are still willing in principle to mentor Afghan police at the district level as part of CSTC-A's Focused District Development Program (FDD), but that the decision would have to be made "at the political level," in part because of budgetary constraints. During his December visit to Rome GEN Petraeus publicly called the Carabinieri "the Michael Jordan of police trainers," further encouraging the GOI to increase its Carabinieri contingent in Afghanistan. However, sending the Carabinieri has by now become a convenient and cheap way to respond to the international community's call for more resources, while diverting attention from the fact that Italy is unwilling to make major new troop commitments.

¶17. (C) Seventeen Italian Finance Police (Guardia di Finanza or GdF) run a Border Police training program in Herat that has earned high marks from Embassy Kabul. U.S. officials in Afghanistan have encouraged them to expand the program to include the U.S.-run training facility at Islam Qala (Afghanistan's busiest border crossing with Iran) to train

customs police, but the GdF are hesitant to expand the mission due to budgetary and force protection concerns (Islam Qala is 100 km west of Herat and Italian forces do not patrol there).

Justice Sector Reform: An Unfulfilled Promise

¶18. (C/NF) Italy has traditionally held the role of lead G8 partner nation for Justice Sector Reform in Afghanistan, providing technical assistance in training judges and prosecutors, helping to draft portions of the Afghan Penal Code and Afghan National Justice Sector Strategy (NJSS), and holding the 2007 Rome Rule of Law Conference, which raised USD 98 million in pledges. However, MFA officials have acknowledged that Italian resources to dedicate to the effort are meager in comparison with those of other donors: the MFA has one part-time legal adviser in charge of coordinating these efforts and a maximum of one or two legal advisers at any given time in their Embassy in Kabul.

¶19. (C/NF) Italy lobbied in 2008 to hold a donor conference on Afghanistan and was irked that France wrested the honor of holding the June 2008 Support Conference in Paris. (MFA officials told us at the time that Italy had a better claim than France because it had more troops in ISAF. Since then, France has surpassed Italy in the ISAF rankings.) Italy pledged Euro 150 million for 2009-2011 at Paris, but has lagged behind on disbursements in the past and may do so again under the Berlusconi government, which is less aid-friendly than its predecessor.

The G8 Conference on Afghanistan: A Leverage Opportunity

¶20. (C/NF) Italy has used its 2009 G8 Presidency as leverage for regaining a lead role on Afghanistan. FM Frattini has announced his intention to hold a Conference on Afghanistan and Pakistan on the margins of the G8 Foreign Ministerial in Trieste (June 25-27), inviting not only G8 Foreign Ministers but those of the region. Other G8 members have expressed reservations about duplication of other efforts underway, such as the series of French meetings in the wake of the 2008 Paris Conference or the Friends of Pakistan Group, but Frattini is determined to move ahead, focusing on border issues as the most likely conference theme. Italy is sending its Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Sergio Mercuri, to Washington February 17-19 to seek our support for the conference. This would be an opportune moment to emphasize that if Italy seeks a leadership role on Afghanistan within the international community, it must be ready to bolster its civilian and military contributions.

Comment/Recommendation

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¶21. (C/NF) GOI officials, and PM Berlusconi in particular, are anxious to forge a strong relationship with the new Administration in Washington. We should leverage that desire to extract a stronger Italian commitment in Afghanistan. The Secretary's first meeting with FM Frattini provides an early opportunity to convey that request at the highest levels; equally useful would be a future meeting between S/E Holbrooke and FM Frattini and MOD La Russa (who has invited Holbrooke to Rome); both are eager to gain insight into U.S. thinking on Afghanistan, and have evinced their desire to more closely calibrate GOI policies and actions with the U.S. The U.S., which has a PRT and OEF forces in RC-West, could offer to provide logistical support to an additional Italian deployment, or even offer to augment its own troop presence in RC-West so as to support Italy's efforts to bring RC-West up to full strength. We should make clear that our support for Italy's attempt to play a lead G8 role on Afghanistan

would be much stronger if we saw the GOI making the courageous choices that other allies have made.

¶22. (C/NF) Furthermore, the "tight budget" excuse for not doing more in Afghanistan should be seen as disingenuous, circular logic. In its budget process, year after year the GOI decides to spend relatively little on defense. Then, when asked by us to do more in Afghanistan, the GOI points to now sacrosanct budget numbers and claims to be unable to do more. In response, USG interlocutors should remind the Italians that expanded operations in Afghanistan will require real sacrifices from all involved, and this may require Italy to shift budget resources from other areas.
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